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Notes on The Cuban Missile Crisis as a Case Study in Historical Deception

Consider the epistemological and historiographical problems of writing the history of and analysing an episode involving at the time highly secret information in different categories of sensitivity, including compartmented intelligence and politically sensitive secrets; where even high-level participants (including, at one stage, even the president!) were denied crucial data that others at the same bureaucratic level possessed; where the need to deceive domestic political rivals and public was intense and lasting; and where participants, officials and memoirists feel bound by team loyalty and by official requirements to maintain secrecy and, where necessary, deception indefinitely

To evaluate the judgments and inferences made by any particular analyst, scholar, or even former participant, it becomes essential to ask: What did he know, and when did he know it?

Note that virtually every researcher, even those with enough access to secret information to have learned how lack of it has distorted other analyses and who are aware that they have not gained access to identifiable bodies of information, has shown remarkable resistance to the insight, even as a hypothesis: I don't know all I need to know, to understand this fully or even adequately."

Each tends to conclude, at the point of publication or or writing up what seems to him (all males) a fairly coherent account, that information that may emerge in future will simply change a few details, fill in a few gaps.

Note my discovery of this, in 1964, in the course of reading successively studies of the crisis done at different levels of clearance or with different access. Each would express the final conclusion, "Now we have the picture, though there are some loose ends to tie up."

The Allison/Harvard emphasis on Bureaucratic Politics tends to downplay the (crucial) importance of access to White House information and memoranda, Oval Office in particular (like RMN--or for that matter, JFK and LBJ, still unavailable--tapes of Oval Office conversations and presidential phone calls and dictabelts).

(These are largely missing from the Pentagon Papers, a crucial lack: as the Berman book, using McGeorge Bundy files, just began to reveal).

At least I was aware, after reading the Pentagon Papers, that I didn't know (I didn't even have very confident hypotheses) why this succession of presidents had all made the decisions they did in Vietnam: LBJ in 1965 above all. It's still mysterious, though I have stronger hypotheses than I did.

At last--I felt this more last night (with my reflections on the lack of discussion of Mongoose and pre-crisis invasion preparations, or of the option of offering to terminate these, from the ExCom records or other records) than ever before--I understand why McGeorge Bundy was so skeptical about my proposed project in 1964 on Crisis Communications, my hopes of discovering useful lessons from patterns of behavior in crises.

He said then that he doubted useful lessons could be drawn--or the crises usefully understood--without access to White House data. And he did not propose to give me access to White House data.

With the new data on Mongoose aims, on pre-crisis preparations, on the questions this raises about the significance of the ExCom, yet with the new transcripts (which, it must be said, he helped provide: and censor?) and data from the Soviets, Dobrynin in particular: it is clear why he made the first judgment--referring specifically to the Cuban Missile Crisis, after all!--and also why he refused me access.

The underlying issue is not merely that of historical understanding, but societal self-understanding and the political accountability of "representatives," an issue of politics and sovereignty. The case for and against secrecy in matters of foreign and defense policy is the case for and against democratic control of foreign policy.

It would not be hard to guess where McGeorge Bundy really stands on this issue. He almost surely believes in elite, "aristocratic" predominance over issues of foreign policy--and in particular, Executive branch predominance over Congress (or courts_ and within the Executive Branch, Presidential control. (His own Brahmin background includes Groton, Yale, Skull and Bones, the Society of Fellows, and Dean of the Harvard Faculty).

He almost surely disparages the ability of "the public," and perhaps of anyone but specialists with high-level Executive branch experience and access, to understand foreign policy matters and the "national interest" adequately and "dispassionately." (I guess this without ever having seen anything he has written or said on this directly). Nor can I believe he takes a very confining view of Constitutional or legal constraints on the President, any more than, say, his brother's father-in-law Dean Acheson.

His attitudes on secrecy are more accessible, and are consistent with the above guesses about his view of democracy and foreign policy, of the public's "right and need to know." He has publicly described a public servant--especially one in a position of special trust such as he held with Kennedy and Johnson--who would ever reveal publicly anything he learned in his job, especially anything at all damaging to his employer, as analogous to a servant who is given a loaded gun as part of his job and who turns it on his patron.

Moreover, unlike other former officials, he has lived up to this code. He has long felt a concern about nuclear weapons policies, but his massive book on the subject, though presented partly as a memoir covering a generation of Executive branch involvement with the subject, reveals, so far as I can tell, not one piece of information that he cannot attribute to previously published, unclassified sources.

In the case of the Cuban Missile Crisis, one of his longest chapters, he contributes, as elsewhere, judgments and bureaucratic insights reflecting his experience, but no new information. (Check what he says, if anything, on Mongoose). When confronted with data on pre-crisis invasion planning by Jim Hershberg, he described this as late as 1987 as "routine contingency planning": certainly conscious deception. (He is one who still has a lot to tell).

His own experience with secrecy and deception goes back a long time. He was intimately related with one of the most significant hoaxes of the Twentieth Century: he was the drafter of Stimson's Harper's article on the reasons for dropping the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. (His father was Stimson's personal secretary, i.e., special assistant; he also worked on (wrote?) Stimson's autobiography, and edited Acheson's speeches, one or both of these while he was a Junior Fellow).

As the President's Special Assistant for National Security Affairs, he presided over the highest-level

committee overseeing all covert operations, and his office was the focal point for all intelligence and estimates addressed to the President. No one, in other words, had greater access to, or broader daily involvement in the workings of the secrecy system and the operations and product of the intelligence community.

[It was in the office of his deputy Carl Kaysen (a reader of my undergraduate thesis on game theory) that I heard a brief discussion of the workings of the compartmented clearance system, the clearances "higher than top secret," of which I later came to hold 12. Alain Enthoven had remarked that he wondered how many such clearances there were in all, and whether anyone held all of them. "I do," said Kaysen with unconcealed satisfaction; "I have all of them."

He was new to the system, and the other three of, Enthoven, Harry Rowen and me, looked briefly at each other in what I understood to be a slightly complicit, condescending mood. As I understood the system, and as I then believed the others understood it, that remark stamped someone who had not yet really grasped how the system operated. An experienced person, I believe, could not possibly express such confidence in such a judgment. There would simply be no way to know this, even for the President, or his Special Assistant.

So far as I know, not one person who has ever held one of these clearances--except myself--has ever revealed publicly (or to Congress) the nature of the system, or the cult and culture of secrecy that incorporates it. (I discussed it in 1971 in a "seminar" of the senior senators "chaired" by Sam Ervin, testified before joint hearings of subcommittees under Kennedy, Ervin and Muskie, and described it in an interview in Rolling Stone in 1973).

That reticence both maintains and expresses that cult; it reflects both an internalization of the values and practices of the secrecy culture and a very rational calculation of the requirements and desirability of remaining employable at high governmental levels (and remaining a member of the club).

Part of this study of CII must be to describe the character of this system, its psychological and bureaucratic effects, and its effect on the "knowability" of data surrounding such crises.

It is noteworthy that no member of ANSA (except perhaps Agee)--with all their experience, former access, and willingness to reveal their own past operations--has addressed this issue in general terms. Several, like MacMichael, undoubtedly have the ability to do so with great insight.

Moreover, since the legal restraints on their own revelations and other former officials' are so damaging to the possibility of democratic understanding and control of foreign policy, ANSA might well take an institutional role in opposing, not only covert operations, but current secrecy regulations: in particular, the steps that the Reagan and Bush Administrations have done to establish long-term control over officials' speech and writing even outside the intelligence community.

The Study of Secrecy

Lack of outsiders' understanding of this problem--and desire to maintain personal relations and access with former officials--has kept both media and scholarly interviewers from ever asking former officials the question: "What made you think you had a right to conceal or lie about this matter so long?"

Thus, "historians" like Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. or Sorensen, or memoirists, or officials like Bundy or

McNamara, who have been caught again and again in having previously lied or concealed, or who have even admitted it, are never challenged on their sense of loyalties and obligations and entitlements that permit them to do this (presumably) in good conscience, or reminded of conflicting obligations, or asked what they are still concealing or lying about.

Nor do former officials or scholars who have come to understand the secrecy system and its impact on public and historical understanding ever undertake, or teach and encourage others to undertake, to investigate or illuminate the workings of the system, and its effects: e.g., pursuing such questions as:

Why do officials lie and conceal? What are the various motives, incentives, aims, rationales, sanctions?

How are secrets kept reliably, for prolonged periods, especially when large numbers of people are involved?

How long can some secrets be kept? How reliably?

What secrets can, or cannot, be kept long? What circumstances or characteristics of the secrets, or the system, bear on this? What are the elements of a theory of the control of leaks?

How is effective secrecy maintained despite leaks? How are leaks "repaired," their effects limited or nullified? How is public attention or inferences and response managed?

What is kept secret, at different levels of "sensitivity"?
(Recall Enzenberger: "The real secret is what is secret.")
Why is it secret? What does secrecy conceal?

One of the best-kept secrets, despite large numbers of knowledgeable people and frequent public disclosures, is the importance of SI: the scale of collection and processing and the value of communications and signals intelligence.

The indoctrination here is so rigorous, the discipline so precise, the job and career sanctions (and related cognitive and self-esteem rewards) so sure and compelling (like a strong addiction: to Inside Dope: fear of being cut off...) and the rationale of "national interest and security" depending on secrecy so persuasive, that masses of individuals keep this secret very reliably--even from their closest associates--indefinitely.

Note how long the secret of ULTRA was kept, even though the credit of winning the war could largely be attributed to it, and even though the breaking of MAGIC had been revealed and Roberta Wohlstetter's book had been (finally, overcoming great opposition!) published.

Then there is covert operations! Note my ignorance of any hint of Mongoose, despite a year's use of clearances that gave me access not only to SI and T but to U2 operations and all the refugee interrogations, etc; and despite two years' apprenticeship under Ed Lansdale just two years after he ceased to head Mongoose! (I never heard him mention Cuba or RFK or Maxwell Taylor, let alone Mongoose!)

I learn of Mongoose from the Church Committee, and from Taylor and Branch: in 1977? Then, the

crucial aims and premises of Mongoose are released--in documents still heavily censored!--in the spring of this year, 1990!

When it comes to managing public attention and awareness and opinion, it is clearly essential to manage not only (leaks from) the Executive, but:

Congress: What it investigates (and who does it); who is asked to testify, and how hard is truth pursued; what questions are asked; what is reported, cleared...

(That management is involved here, both of Congress and within Congress, became unmistakably clear in the Irangate "investigation").

The Media.

Universities and Scholarship.

Sources on these processes: First, the Bernstein article in Rolling Stone: still virtually unique, never followed up (nor publishable except in Rolling Stone!) Bernstein used sources and findings that had been excluded, by agreement with CIA, from the Church Committee investigation (which was also headed off from investigating Indonesia, either 1958 or 1965; see the general management of Church, via his presidential candidate ambitions. And see his later behavior on the "unacceptable Soviet brigade in Cuba," in 1979, killing SALT-II).

But even though Bernstein found that the CIA relations with the media were "too sensitive for the Church Report" (compared to assassinations!), he found hints of a relationship still more sensitive than that with the press: CIA relations with universities! (Still no word, a dozen years later, as to why that is so secret, what the secret is.)

The limitations and omissions of the Irangate "investigation" show the sensitivity and the extremely effective management of awareness of CIA relations (i.e., Presidential, Executive Branch relations via CIA: and perhaps Congressional relations as well, in various ways) with drug networks and, more generally, with organized crime: for control of foreign regimes, societies, police forces, municipal authorities; for assassination; for arms smuggling, money laundering, and other aspects of the logistics and financing of covert wars. Because of official rhetoric and declaratory policy ("Wars on Drugs and Crime") and public revulsion, these relations are among the tightest secrets.

(Such relations were heavily involved--thereby contributing to sensitivity about secrecy--in Cuba I, Mongoose and Cuba II, via drug-involved contras recruited or used in all of these for various purposes, assassination attempts against Castro, Presidential nomination and election campaigns (in particular, Sam Giancana's role in the West Virginia primary and the Chicago graveyard vote in 1960), and also, Miami Cuban and organized crime influences on the very aim and importance of overthrowing Castro and "recovering" Cuba!)

(Likewise, in relations with the GVN--e.g., Ky, Loan, Thieu, earlier Ngo Dinh Diem--and Laos (Vang Pao, now returning to SEA), Nationalist China, Afghanistan, Thailand, Burma, Central America and Mexico, Peru/Colombia/Bolivia (Lebanon?)...

Another channel of influence, whose nature is sensitive: Bribery, in particular the distribution of

bribes in connection with arms contracts (e.g., Lockheed). (See the shift in Lockheed bribes in Indonesia just prior to the Suharto takeover in 1965). See flow to extreme right-wingers like Kodama in Japan.

Another sensitive matter: CIA/US relations with, use of, support of, alliance with: "ex"-Nazis, and other "extreme right-wingers."

But I am getting off the subject of CII, into the general question of "What secrecy conceals: Why secrets are secret.

The question of the reasons for and the management of secrecy (the construction of secrecy, of untruth, of deception, of historical misapprehension) is a good approach to the understanding of "conspiracy."

It is increasingly clear that on Cuba II (and Cuba I, Mongoose) there has been for 30 years a conspiracy of silence, and of deception. This is evident from the lies and silence about Kennedy's position on a negotiated outcome of the crisis--trading Turkish missiles (and perhaps, with more significance in his own eyes as well as Khrushchev's than others knew or admitted, a no-invasion pledge) for Cuban missiles--until Bromley Smith's notes and then the Bundy transcripts of October 27 were revealed: despite the knowledge of every member of the ExCom over a quarter of a century.

We even know something about the process of this. E.g., the hierarchical discipline: The President's directive that members of the ExCom were to "sing one tune" in public, and that certain things in particular (not all specified, yet) were to be specially concealed. And note the fate of those, on other occasions, who broke this discipline: e.g., Chester Bowles, after Cuba I. Note the use of selective leaks by the President (?) against Adlai Stevenson.

Then, there is the formal process of compartmentation, as part of the secrecy process. I learned 26 years ago of the existence and the (yet-untold, almost entirely unknown) impact even on Presidential knowledge of a significant dimension of the crisis-process that has never yet been hinted at in other accounts: the PSALM and ELITE clearances in September and October.

It is worth investigating and trying to recall what it was about the crisis in my 1964 that first changed my appreciation of it, or raised puzzling questions, after my participation in 1962? Or even earlier: what did I learn from my participation that separated my understanding from that of the general public, and which led to my determination to study the crisis? These represent case studies in the effects of differential access; as well as sequential stages in a learning process. All of which--like the sequential effects of continuing revelations, on the need (perceived, it seems, mainly by me) to reexamine all questions, to frame new questions, to seek new sources--bears on my current conclusion:

We are somewhere in the middle of our efforts to understand this most-dangerous nuclear crisis nearly thirty years ago: No longer at the beginning, but nowhere near the end!